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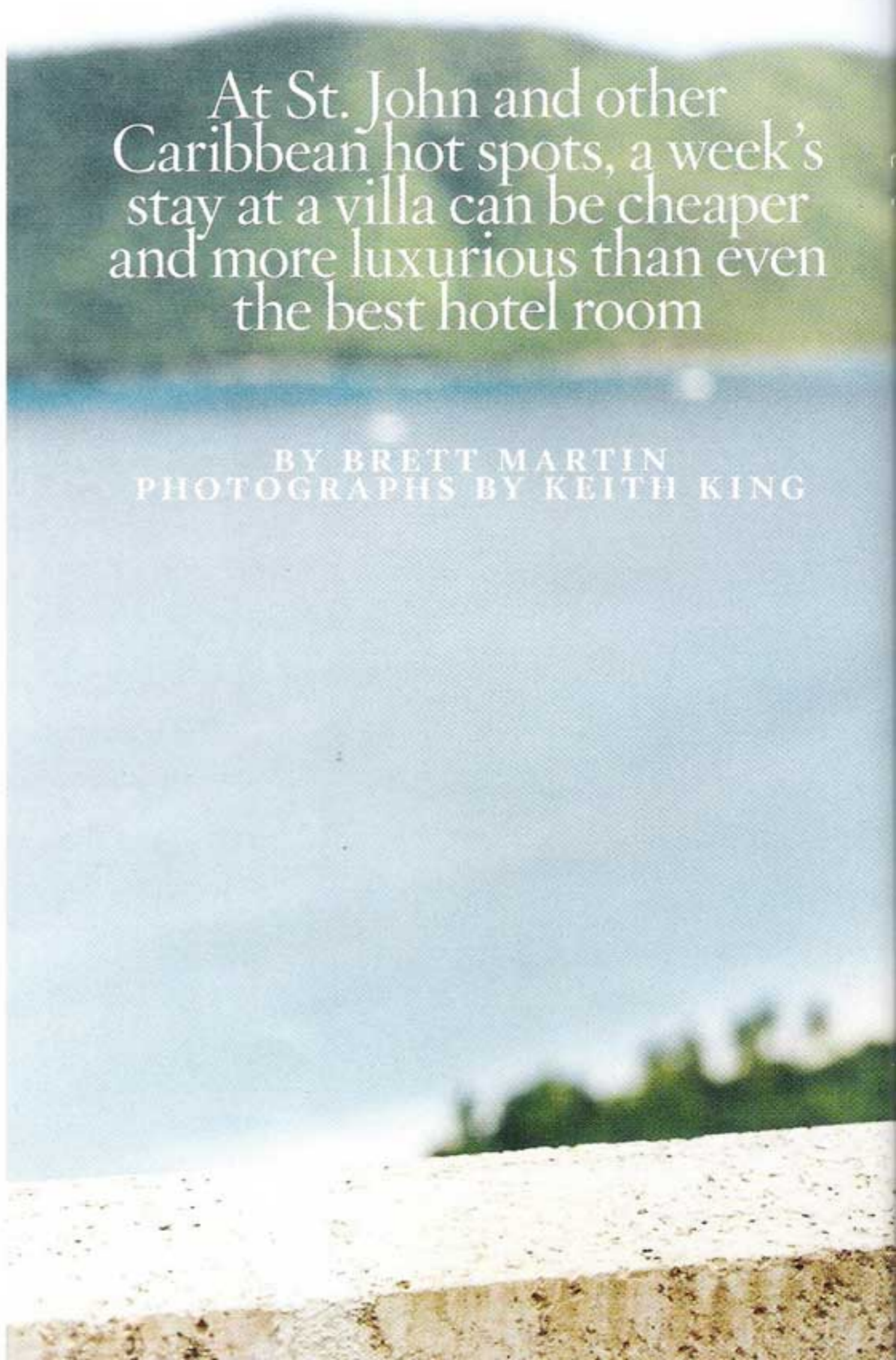
The benefits to renting a villa begin at the airport. There you will sit in the departure area and survey your fellow passengers, inevitably a kind of Peterson's Field Guide to Caribbean flotsam and jetsam: the knots of senior

citizens on their way to meet cruise ships; the frat boys in Señor Frog T-shirts; the would-be Jimmy Buffetts with leathery faces and thinning ponytails; the moms already applying sunscreen to their screaming kids and the dads already plotting their escape to a fishing boat or golf cart. You will look around at them and whisper to yourself, "After this flight is over, I will never see any of you people ever again. Not at the pool. Not at the reception desk. Not at breakfast. Never."

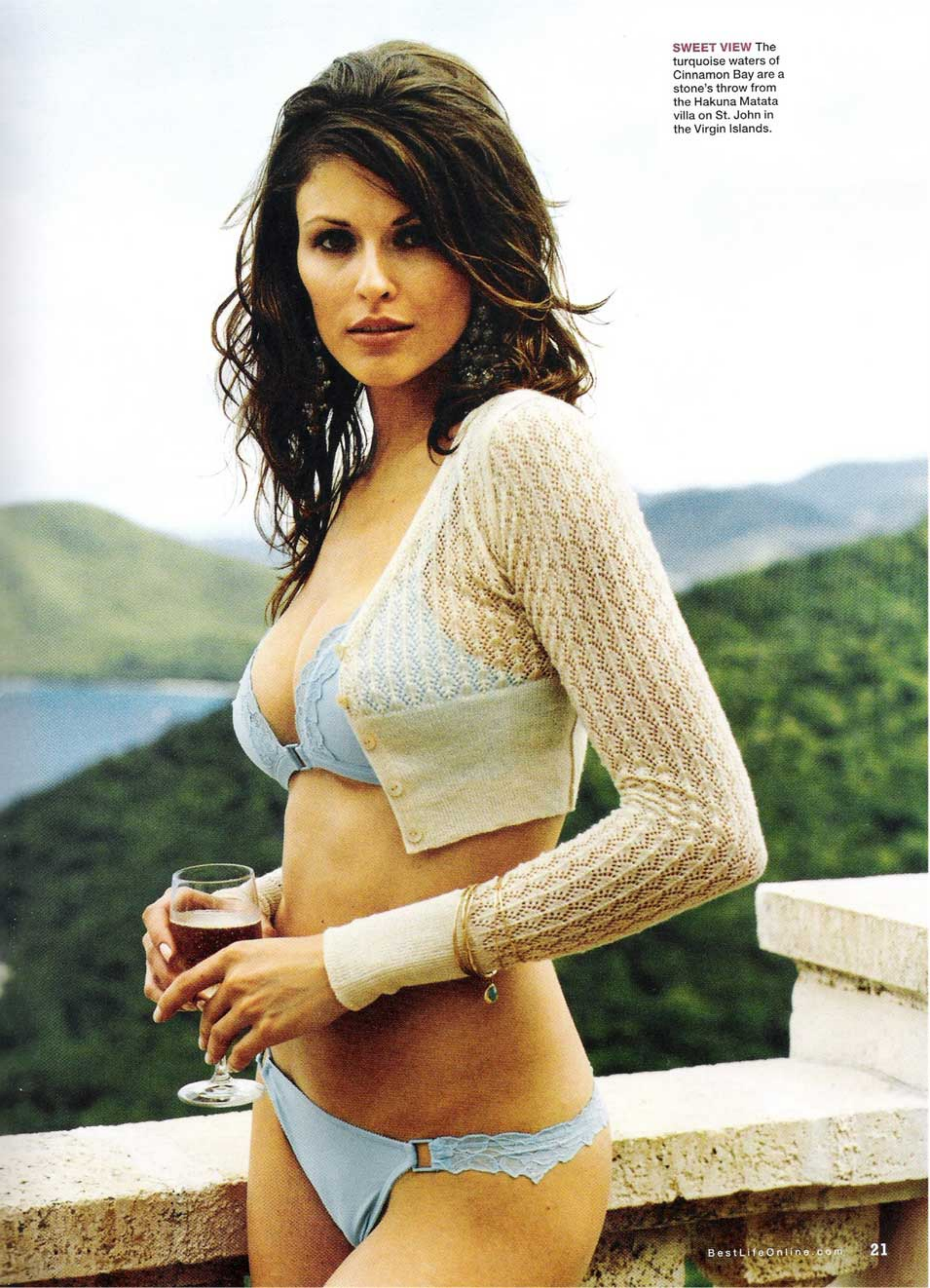
While your cabinmates are checking in at the local upscale resort, you'll be wandering through room after impeccably decorated room of your villa trying to figure out which one has the best view of the ocean from its private balcony. And if you've played your cards right, you and your handpicked companions may have paid less for your accommodations than the resort crowd did. With four bedrooms, St. John's Hakuna Matata averages out to just \$370 per night per couple—in the high season. Compare that to the nearby

At St. John and other Caribbean hot spots, a week's stay at a villa can be cheaper and more luxurious than even the best hotel room

BY BRETT MARTIN
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KEITH KING



SWEET VIEW The turquoise waters of Cinnamon Bay are a stone's throw from the Hakuna Matata villa on St. John in the Virgin Islands.



Westin St. John Resort, where the rack rate can be as much as \$700 per night.

But beyond cost (and even beyond the undeniable tingle that saying the words “my villa” provokes), there’s a vast aesthetic difference. A villa is somehow *of* a place—integrally part of the landscape—an authentic alternative to the McLuxury served up by even a well-meaning hotel chain. To stay in a private residence puts you in a community, not only of your neighbors and the locals you’ll meet at the market, but of a sort of “villa-ocracy” whose members have known how to travel right through the ages: from Italian counts relaxing in the hills of Tuscany to David Letterman taking a break on St. Bart’s.

As you may have imagined, the inaugural, stock-up trip to the liquor store is one of the great rituals of villa life. So are a host of other, usually boring, domestic chores. Like ending an evening of picking out constellations in the hot tub by throwing your bathing suit in the dryer, so it will be ready for the beach in the morning. Or telling the cook the snacks you had in mind for tomorrow’s poolside backgammon tournament.

Eventually, of course, you will deign to come down off the mountain and spend a few hours snorkeling across impossibly blue water or riding a horse over wild green hills or just lolling in the sand. And then, pleasantly sunburned and weary, you will return to your villa—up the dirt road and past the gate and up the long driveway—and, inevitably, someone will sigh happily and say, “Ah, home.”

And, for a week at least, they’ll be right.



LIQUID PLEASURES

The Hakuna Matata offers guests a pool, an on-site waterfall, and a stone hot tub. Returning from a dip in Cinnamon Bay (below)

Virgin extras

Eat

ZoZo’s Ristorante serves up St. John’s best Italian-Caribbean fusion, with fresh seafood dishes like peppercorn diver scallops and basil red snapper with asparagus risotto (340-693-9200, zozos.net). For the most authentic West Indian fare, head to Vie’s Snack Shack, where Miss St. John 1963, Violet Mahabir, has been cooking up her famous garlic chicken legs and conch fritters for more than 3 decades (Route 107, Friis Bay, St. John, 340-693-5033). The restaurant on St. Thomas worth the 45-minute ferry commute is Craig & Sally’s, where the menu changes daily according to chef Sally Darash’s whims. Favorites include filet mignon with macadamia-nut sauce and lobster-stuffed twice-baked potatoes. The wine list boasts more than 300 bottles (22 Honduras at Rue Normandie, 340-777-9949).

Drink

Hang out with local yachters and expats at Skinny Legs in the East End. Owners Doug and Moe have been hosting live reggae bands and serving cold Carib beer for the past 15 years (Route 10, Coral Bay, 340-779-4982). When you’re out on a snorkeling or dive charter, make sure the captain stops at Willy T’s, a 100-foot Baltic trading schooner-turned-bar anchored off the uninhabited Norman Island (williamthornton.com).

Swim

Thanks to land donations by Laurence Rockefeller in 1956, 60 percent of St. John is national parkland, including all of the island’s north-shore beaches. Avoid the tourists at Trunk Bay by heading to the secluded Solomon Bay, accessible only by foot. For the best starfish spotting, start at the northeast fringe of Leinster Bay beach and snorkel a fifth of a mile out to Waterlemon Cay, where you can see octopuses and sea turtles.

Dive

Between the islands of St. John and St. Thomas is a glut of underwater caves, pristine reefs, and wrecks. The certified instructors from Cruz Bay Watersport (divestjohn.com) will lead you to sites like the Tunnels at Thatch Cay, featuring a 60-foot passageway that links the bay to the ocean, and the wreck of the RMS *Rhone*, a British steamer that went down in 1867 off Salt Island. >



Charter

Explore the British Virgin Islands on board David and Janet McNeil's 60-foot Hatteras, *The Elixir*, which will easily accommodate six for a day cruise (340-344-3336, elixircharters.com). The McNeils will fuel you up with eggs Benedict and Bloody Marys for breakfast and steak and lobster at lunch and will take you just about anywhere you want to go. We suggest Virgin Gorda, where you can swim and explore the Baths, a cluster of house-size boulders on the beach that form grottoes and pools. Then hit Norman Island, the setting for Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, where you can snorkel inside a 70-foot-long sea cave. Finish up with Jost Van Dyke (accessible only by water), where Foxy's bar still distills its own rum.

Catch

The 6-mile-deep Puerto Rico Trench, 20 miles off the north coast of St. Thomas, is teeming with sailfish, wahoo, and blue marlin. In fact, four 1,000-pound-plus blues, including three that qualified for world records, have been caught here. Captain Eddie Morrison, who has been named top local captain in the past five U.S. Virgin Islands Open tournaments, is your man for the deep water (from \$700; 340-693-5929, marlinprince.com). On the fly-fishing front, Tom McQuade has been tying saltwater flies for 20 years and will guide you to the secret spots for bonefish and tarpon (from \$250; 340-693-9446, visaltwaterfly.com).



OUTDOOR POLICY
Each room at the Hakuna Matata has a private terrace.

Play

When Bill Gates is in the Virgin Islands, he usually squeezes in 18 holes at the Mahogany Run Golf Course on St. Thomas. *Golf Digest* declared the par-70 course, carved out of almost 110 acres of oceanfront property, an "engineering marvel." Holes 13 through 15, known as the Devil's Triangle, hug the coastline on rocky cliffs (mahoganyrungolf.com). JESSICA LOTHSTEIN

3 More Villa Vacations

Forgo the chain resort for a luxury home



Balkan Islands

Ever since Croatia's war of independence ended in 1995, tourism has been big business. Its sunny Adriatic coast, with 718 islands, is Europe's new hot spot, and residents are taking advantage of the increased visibility by renting out their centuries-old stone homes to visitors. The **Villa Rosemarine** (above), for example, is a seven-bedroom stone house on the island of Brac and boasts a Jacuzzi, a chef, and a 21-foot speedboat moored to a private jetty. Starting at \$1,200 per night; luxuryretreats.com

Western Europe

Renting a villa in Tuscany or a château in Provence became a cliché for good reason: It's a cultural and gastronomical experience bar none. Spend your days strolling the countryside and cobblestone streets of walled cities and your nights relaxing in an ancient home surrounded by vineyards, olive groves, and sunflower fields. Avoid

the crowds and inflated rental costs now plaguing Tuscan towns like Cortona ever since the publication of *Under the Tuscan Sun* by staying in Tuscany's still-unexploited neighbor, Umbria. **Torretta** (below), a five-bedroom hilltop house, features a private art collection and a pool with an alfresco dining area. Starting at \$4,600 per week; lacurevillas.com



Central America

When you think of villas, you probably don't think of Mexico and Central America. You should. Mexican Destinations (mexicandestinations.com) has world-class properties in Mexico's colonial interior, and rental agencies Villas of the World (villasoftheworld.com) and LaCure have listings for Mexico, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. The four-bedroom **Betseyville** (above), in Barra de Potosi, Mexico, has two pools, sprawling gardens, a stocked kitchen (even beer and tequila), and a man named Nino who cooks up breakfast each morning. Starting at \$5,500 per week; betseyville.com

Best Villa-Rental Agencies

LaCure Villas

Geoffrey Williams and John Abrahams started this rental company back in 1979 with just five Jamaican properties. The business partners now rent more than 600 properties in 30 countries, starting at just \$2,000 per week. lacurevillas.com

Luxury Retreats

With more than 1,300 villas around the world, this agency stands out for its extraordinary concierge service, which deems no detail or request out of the question—from a poolside massage to a gourmet dinner on the beach followed by fireworks. luxuryretreats.com

McLaughlin Anderson

Nancy Anderson founded this company 20 years ago on St. Thomas and has built up the most extensive portfolio of villas in the Caribbean, offering more than 1,800 rentals, including the beautiful Hakuna Matata. mclaughlinanderson.com